

## Message Text

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PAGE 01 BUENOS 05095 292142Z

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FM AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2075

C O N F I D E N T I A L BUENOS AIRES 5095

E. O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, PGOV, AR

SUBJECT: IMPROVED GOVERNMENT-PRESS RELATIONS IN ARGENTINA

REF: BA 3557

SUMMARY. A NEW ERA IN GOVERNMENT-PRESS RELATIONS APPEARS TO HAVE BEGUN WITH THE RECENT APPOINTMENT OF JOSE JOAQUIN STUPENENGO AS PRESIDENTIAL PRESS SECRETARY. THE CHANGE IN ATMOSPHERE IS PALPABLE, BUT HOW LONG IT WILL LAST IS OPEN TO QUESTION. END SUMMARY.

1. ON JULY 22 JOSE JOAQUIN STUPENENGO REPLACED JOSE MARIA VILLONE AS PRESIDENTIAL PRESS SECRETARY. ACCORDING TO EMBASSY SOURCES, STUPENENGO, A WELL KNOWN TV PRODUCER WHOSE MOST RECENT JOB WAS PRESS SECRETARY FOR THE CITY OF BUENOS AIRES, WAS SUGGESTED FOR THE JOB BY MIN EDUCATION OSCAR IVANISSEVICH. HE IS NOT A PERONIST, AND HIS APPOINTMENT RAISED SOME EYEBROWS AND A FEW OBJECTIONS IN PERONIST CIRCLES. ADDITIONALLY, HE IS THE SON OF NAVAL CAPTAIN STUPENENGO, ONE OF THE LEADERS OOF THE 1955 REVOLUTION THAT OVERTHREW THE PERON GOVERNMENT.

2. VILLONE'S TENURE AS PRESS SECRETARY WAS CHARACTERIZED BY AN OVER TIGHTENING KNOT OF OVERT AND COVERT GOVERNMENT ATTEMPTS TO CENSURE THE NEWS MEDIA (SEE REFTTEL).

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PAGE 02 BUENOS 05095 292142Z

STUPENENGO LOST LITTLE TIME IN CHANGING THE IMAGE

HIS PREDECESSOR HAD GIVEN TO THE OFFICE. HIS ACTIONS INDICATE THAT A NEW ERA IN GOVT-PRESS RELATIONS HAS BEGUN. HE VISITED SEVERAL KEY NEWSPAPERS DURING HIS FIRST DAY ON THE JOB AND THE MESSAGE HE CARRIED WAS ONE OF MODERATION AND COMPROMISE. HE PROMISED "EVENHANDED TREATMENT" AND "OPENESS" IN DEALING WITH THE NEWS MEDIA. THIS WAS INTERPRETED AS MEANING AN END TO GOVERNMENT MANIPULATION OF OFFICIAL PUBLICITY AS A METHOD OF CENSORSHIP. IN ADDITION, STUPENENGO ADVISED HE WOULD PROPOSE THE REPEAL OF DECREE 1273 WHICH PROHIBITED LOCAL NEWS MEDIA FROM USING INFORMATION ABOUT ARGENTINA OBTAINED FROM FOREIGN NEWS AGENCIES (SEE REFTEL). FINALLY, HE ASKED FOR "PATIENCE" WITH REGARD TO THE DEBTS (TOTALING SEVERAL HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLARS) THAT TELAM, THE OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT NEWS AGENCY, HAS RUN UP WITH LOCAL NEWS MEDIA FOR GOVERNMENT PUBLICITY. SOME MEDIA, NOTABLY PROVINCIAL NEWSPAPERS, FACE A SERIOUS LIQUIDITY CRISIS AS A RESULT OF OFFICIAL PUBLICITY PAYMENT DELAYS. STUPENENGO PROMISED TO SEEKS A PROMPT RESOLUTION OF THE PROBLEM.

3. NEWS MEDIA WASTED LITTLE TIME IN PUTTING THE "OPENNESS" POLICY TO THE TEST. WITHIN 24 HOURS LOCAL GOVERNMENT-OWNED TV STATIONS HAD BROADCAST SEVERAL COMMENTARIES CRITICAL OF THE GOVERNMENT, INCLUDING AN INTERVIEW WITH UCR LEADER RICARDO BALBIN IN WHICH HE CALLED UPON MRS M PERON TO TAKE A LEAVE OF ABSENCE AND REST. NEWSPAPERS HAVE ALSO STEPPED UP THEIR IN-DEPTH REPORTING OF THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CRISIS. OUTRIGHT CRITICISM ONCE LIMITED TO LA PRENSA AND MORE RECENTLY ESPOUSED BY LEFTIST-INTELLECTUAL LA OPINION, HAS SPREAD TO MOST OTHER NEWSPAPERS. ONE PRESS SOURCE CALLED THESE DEVELOPMENTS "A BREATH OF FRESH AIR IN A STALE ROOM."

4. COMMENT. THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT A PALPABLE CHANGE IN GOVERNMENT INFORMATION POLICY IS TAKING PLACE. CONSERVATIVE LA PRENSA, LONG ONE OF THE GOVERNMENT'S SEVEREST CRITICS, WENT SO FAR AS TO EDITORIALIZE THAT "THE POSSIBLE CHANGES IN THE FUTURE CONDUCT OF THE PRESS SECRETARIAT COULD BE THE TOUCHSTONE OF THE POLITICAL COURSE OF THE GOVERNMENT." HOW LONG IT CAN

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 BUENOS 05095 292142Z

LAST, HOWEVER, IS OPEN TO SERIOUS QUESTION. WHEN ASKED BY ONE NEWMAN HOW LONG HE EXPECTED TO REMAIN IN OFFICE, STUPENENGO ANSWERED "ABOUT ONE WEEK." NEVERTHELESS, HOWEVER LONG HIS TENURE AS PRESS SECRETARY MAY BE, IT SEEMS DOUBTFUL THAT THE NEWS MEDIA WOULD DOCILELY ACCEPT A RETURN TO THEIR FORMER MUZZLED CONDITION. FRESH AIR CAN BE INVIGORATING.

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